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Sage and Cowdogs

by Walt McDonald

Go home, Billy Joe, and tell the brave
you're staying. B movies and spurs
don't feed steers anymore. Now, your rivals
are nephews of riders you taught how.

Unstrap your movie gun and chaps,
go back and straddle your own corral.
Old movie cowboys on stallions
dodged sentimentality like blanks,

but those were the thirties, when westerns
brought the world escape, the vinegar-sweet
aroma of dusty sagebrush and saddles.
Dialogue was a line of black-and-white clichés

lean as the men, gunshots repeated often.
Stars from the Bronx or Omaha seemed natural
as trained dogs almost as fast as horses.
Wild Bill and Hopalong spoke lines as stiff

as cold leather, but words didn't matter
behind scowls: on Saturdays, I was there.
Old stunt man with broken bones, gimpy
before you turned thirty, you were never

the heavy, only an extra in eighty films
with assorted hats and names like Buck
or Bill, one of the boys in the posse
trotting after the star and eating dust.

